

Dear Santa Fe residents:

The issue of public parking at the new Santa Fe County Courthouse has been a hot topic recently. I would like to give you a little background and to explain my vote on the issue.

Santa Fe County has the responsibility of building and maintaining a County Courthouse, otherwise known as the First Judicial District Court. The money for both the construction and the maintenance comes from the County budget, not from the budget for the District Court.

The conversation about replacing the District Court building on Catron Street began back in the late nineties. At that time, there was discussion and debate about where the new building should be located. Some in County government wanted it to be near the County Jail (at the Public Safety Complex off of Highway 14). But the judges and many of the attorneys involved in cases before the Court mostly preferred a downtown location. For one thing, many of the attorneys had offices located downtown. In addition, there is a State law that mandates that a District Court must be located in the County seat -- in this case, within the City of Santa Fe. (Unspoken, but a real consideration for the judges and attorneys, was their desire to be within walking distance of Santa Fe's many fine restaurants for lunch.)

In the early 2000's there was another possibility for the location of the new District Court, namely, on Galisteo Street south of St. Michael's Drive near the current location of the Magistrate Court. The State of New Mexico was willing to sell 6 acres of land to the County for a reasonable price. This would have been a good location, since the building could have been single-story, yet still large enough for the extra size required for the new courthouse; moreover, there would have been ample parking for jurors, judges, attorneys, officers of the Sheriff's Department, and the District Attorney's Office, as well as the public. However, at the time that this was discussed, most of the judges and attorneys held firm in their belief that the new Courthouse should be built downtown.

Unfortunately, there were few possibilities for a good downtown location. The current site was the best of the options that were available at the time that the County was planning for the project. However, the site required underground parking because of its small footprint, as well as height limitations imposed by the City. In order to get enough parking for the judges, court staff, DA's Office, and Sheriffs, the County had to provide two levels of underground parking. At the time that the bond issue was put forward to obtain the necessary funds for construction of the building, promises were made that there would also be public parking provided.

That promise was made before underground contamination (from a gas station across the street in former times) was discovered during excavation. Rather than just cover up the hole and allow the plume of gasoline to work its way toward the Santa Fe River, the County decided to clean the site up and modify the design of the underground parking. The good news is that the site has been cleaned up completely. The bad news is that there are now fewer spaces in the structure than were originally envisioned (approximately 170, rather than 190).

The Board of County Commissioners were presented with three options for public parking at the Courthouse: (1) allow no public parking in the underground structure; (2) allocate 40 spaces for

free public parking; (3) allocate 40 spaces for paid public parking. Just to put these 40 spaces in perspective, about 800 people per day from the public visit the County Courthouse, many for a short time, but some for long periods. Note that when somebody pulls into either level of the parking garage, it is fairly difficult to turn around and exit if it is full.

Costs for operation of the building increase substantially if public parking is allowed in the underground parking structure, including the need for a full-time attendant at the entrance to control traffic and extra Sheriff's deputies to patrol both levels of the parking garage. As it is, this building is going to cost a great deal more to maintain than the current County Courthouse, namely, about \$1 million extra from the County budget -- to be borne by you, the County taxpayers, of course.

I voted for the option of no public parking in the underground garage for two reasons. Number one is security: District Attorney Pacheco and Sheriff Garcia both testified about the potential dangers of allowing public underground parking in a Courthouse. They also noted that there are no District Courts in the State of New Mexico that have underground public parking.

The second reason for my vote was that there is not enough public parking proposed anyway. (If you do the math: 800 people per 8-hour day means an average of 100 single-person cars -- not that many people car-pool -- competing angrily for 40 public underground parking spaces.) Therefore, I believe that we have to come up with another option. There are several parking lots in the area that the County could either purchase or lease long-term. These could provide significantly more parking spaces, particularly if a multi-story garage were built. The County Manager is currently investigating a number of possibilities.

Let me also mention one other option that may be a good compromise. If the judges and staff were to lease parking spaces at the Railyard, the entire underground parking at the Courthouse (with the exception of the 20 secure parking spaces for prisoner transport) could become public, including spaces for the disabled. Of course, the public would have to pay for the parking, so as not to compete with private and city parking lots in the nearby area. Then the County could use that funding for the extra security required, namely, Sheriff's deputies and a parking attendant (estimated to be around \$125,000 per year). However, it would be sensible to allow jurors to get their parking validated, since they are performing an important public service.

There are advantages to having a County Courthouse downtown. Obviously, it is more convenient for the judges and attorneys, and it helps promote economic activity downtown as well. But there is a downside: parking in Santa Fe is always a problem, and it is only going to get worse unless we build more multi-story garages, or gasoline gets so expensive that people are forced to carpool or use the Santa Fe Trails bus system. Going forward, we have to put some thought into how best to solve the parking problem, not only for the public's convenience, but for their pocketbooks, too.

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